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For Sale – Sex in the Country: The Benefits of Sex Work as an Occupational Choice in Rural NSW Australia

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Abstract

Drawing upon sociology of work, feminist theory and past sex worker research, we present the first study to explore the sex work industry in rural Australia. Using qualitative data from interviews conducted December 2004 - February 2005 with 20 sex industry workers in New South Wales, we question existing assumptions and generalizations surrounding contemporary sex work to explore how industry workers perceive their career experiences. Specifically, we explore workers' motivations for entering and continuing to be involved in the industry, the profession benefits and historical changes. In contrast to radical feminist theory's equation of sex work with victimization, these narratives by rural sex workers portray experiences of sexual empowerment, economic advancement, job flexibility, achievement and examples of positive social interaction. In conclusion, our findings provide contrasting data to the sex politics surrounding "prostitution" put forth by radical feminists as we reaffirm the sex industry to be a legitimate career option in rural Australia and challenge the determinism used to labelled sex work as definitively degrading and deleterious to women.

For Sale – Sex in the Country: The Benefits of Sex Work as an Occupational Choice in Rural NSW Australia

Seminal gendered analyses of work, within the sociology of work, have concentrated upon women's work in professions/organizations (Epstein 1993), in "blue-collar" and service jobs (Reskin and Padavic 1994) and in house work/unpaid labour (Acker 1989; Hochschild 1989). However, despite its prevalence, and increased government interest, 'sex work' (primarily labelled 'prostitution') remains a contested discourse in the literature (Lorber 1999).

In Australia, prostitution is "regarded as work" and "legalized or decriminalized" in 4 states/territories (Sullivan 2004: 252). Beginning with the Australian Prostitutes Collective, the first sex worker advocacy organization to receive government funding

for health/welfare services, Australia continues to decriminalize the industry (Perkins 1991). Decriminalization has led to visibility, political action and academic conceptualization (Sullivan 1997).

Internationally, gender analyses are dichotomized into feminists resisting prostitution (Stark and Whisnant 2004; Barry 1995) labelling prostitution a social problem (Brock 1998; Scambler & Scambler 1997) or slavery (Carter 2004; Farley and Lynne 2004) and others understanding prostitution as a complex work issue deserving decriminalization/legislative protection of workers' rights (O'Neill 2001; Pheterson 1996), foregrounding work conditions (Alexander 1998).

Whereas recent sociological research in Britain on sex workers applied Hochschild's concept of "emotion work" to analyse the use of humour in sexual exchange, we diverge from social-psychological analysis of the "extreme profession" (Sanders 2004). Brock's Canadian analysis of the profession as a "social problem", identifies prostitutes are frequently "prevented from entering discourses which determine their work and construct their identities" (1998: 137). We challenge this tradition by enabling sex workers to "tell their story" about work in their own words. We build upon Perkins and Bennett's (1985) Australian sex industry research, yet differ from the majority of literature by focusing on rural workers. Whereas popular understandings of prostitution largely contain narratives of urban 'street work' and rural research focuses on women on farms in their roles as 'wife' or 'mother' (Lockie 2001), we privilege rural women in non-traditional work roles.

Our aim is to give voice to 20 sex industry workers interviewed in rural New South Wales December, 2004-February 2005 and identify 1) work motivations/reasons for entering the industry 2) profession benefits and 3) historical changes in employment. This feminist analysis questions Lorber's assertion "economic exploitation and sexual stigmatization victimize prostitutes" (1999: 428). As sex workers vocalize career issues, the degree to which occupational choice "excommunicate[s]" them from "polite society" can be explored. We uphold Lorber's directive to not categorize/classify sex workers as either "patriarchal sexually exploited or free agent sex workers" to gain insight into "the knowledge of sex workers lives and customers' motivations, which are differentially shaped by gendered statuses within social

structures as well as by cultural values and economic opportunities and constraints" (Lorber, 1999: 428). Finally, we question *a priori* assumptions and generalizations surrounding sex work to explore how/if workers perceive themselves as upholding and benefiting from the "economic, social, sexual and gender arrangements" (Lorber 1999: 428) surrounding their working conditions.

Historically, exposure by family members to brothels facilitated women's entry into sex work (Best 1982). Only one worker we interviewed described family exposure as influencing her work. She explains: "My boyfriend's extremely supportive... he said, "I don't like you doing it but I'd have more of a problem if you do without pay, so..." but see, his Mum was a [sex worker and] stripper too, so..."

Another worker reveals exposure creates opportunities otherwise less visible:

I didn't go to a brothel with the intention of being a working girl. I went to the brothel for the first time as a writer – because I'm a romance writer...and I thought that I would be able to get a lot of information for my short stories because I had a contract to fulfil...I asked permission from the brothel owner to interview the girls for stories, and then the staff talked me into becoming a working girl.

"Abandonment" is an historical reason why women entered brothel work in the 19th century (Best 1982). Some workers in contemporary Australia turn to the profession not because of "abandonment" by their husbands, which is an ideology characteristic of patriarchal 19th century gender norms, but to regain ultimate power and control over their sexuality, stripped from them as a result of abusive relationships. A mature worker describes:

I'd come out of 3 bad relationships with womanising men, from when I was 50 onwards, and I'd suffered a lot of pain – I'd had a sexual awakening at 50, and those 3 relationships were the agony and the ecstasy – great sex, great lovers, but painful men. And they ripped me off financially, they used me and abused me, and ... the pain was just so great that I had made up my mind that I wouldn't have another relationship with a man. I had considered becoming a lesbian, because I felt that a woman gave you more emotional support than men, and I was interested in exploring my sexuality with women. I wasn't particularly interested in becoming a prostitute, but I did want to continue to be sexually active in a safe way. And also, I was desperate for money, because these men had done me in, and I was really destitute.

I enjoy having equal power with men for the first time in my life...sometimes feeling like I've got more power than some men.

Another worker describes sex work as a type of retribution, an area in life where she maintains control:

It's my way of getting back something from the prick [husband] that had taken everything from me... it's one place I actually feel in control.

Although sexual empowerment is identified by some mature workers as a key reason, for the majority, money is the reason for entering, and key motivation for remaining, in this profession. Data from 5 workers highlights the importance and centrality of monetary reward:

We [husband and wife] actually heard a radio interview that talked about how much sex workers were making a mint during the Sydney Olympics and how much money they were making and at that point [my husband] was getting very burnt out and looking for a means to help support his income for a while so that he could have a rest...I work in the industry because it allows me to earn money in a short amount of time without having to give up my precious time... I don't do it for sex, I do it for money... I don't have a need for doing sex work, apart from the fact that it earns me good money. It's not like I'm driven to do it by other reasons.

I was really short of money and I thought...maybe it's a way...of getting ahead a bit...I thought well I might give it a go then, but I ended up getting a job, so I went with that.

(And what made you choose that [full-service sex rather than massage]?)
full-service is mostly where the more money is...just pay off my bills and just live comfortably, that's the only reason I'm doing it.
(So the main inclination is to get some money?)
Yes... The nicest part will probably be the money

If given 30 years I have got into the sex industry, it would have been purely for the money.

I hear that on a really regular basis, that people who have never thought of working in the industry have entered into it...quite often, it's because of financial difficulties...I enjoy the pleasure of receiving good money for easy work – what I consider easier work than in my other occupations.

... the money sounded good.

The best part of my job is the income.

The need to finance, and hide, pregnancies motivated some brothel workers of bygone eras. Today, pregnancy does not underpin rural sex work. To the contrary, one prior

worker, pregnant at the interview, cited pregnancy as the reason for terminating sex work. Financing parental and eldercare obligations motivate some sex workers:

I was supporting my parents and the children at that stage, and my current qualifications didn't earn me enough money to afford the lifestyle that I wanted to live.

I was already employed as a secretary, but I needed casual work because I had a son lived in Perth – with his father – and needed airfares over here every school holidays. So I just needed extra money.

Rather than earning money to raise young children, some modern women work to finance their children's higher education:

I was kind of forced to work there, in the brothel at Orange and privately at Bathurst, because my son is in uni there, and I had to travel all that way down, and I had a car problem – needed some instant cash, in Bathurst – so that's why I worked there. I just joined in with a woman I knew, and, another time in Bathurst, I just ran out of money because of university expenses, so I went to work in the brothel in Orange.

My son and my daughter were the first ones to suggest to me that I ought to do it rather than have another womanising bastard and I suppose they're very supportive too because they enjoy the money, the extra money it provides for them.

and their own education:

While I'm studying, which is going to be for another six months, until next year. Then, if I decide to do more study and go on to do my R. Eds., it will be 2 1/2 years I'll do it through medicine. Then once I start working as a nurse I can stop.

Unsurprisingly, brothel owners also cite economic gain as a key interest in individual involvement. One landlord-turned-brothel-owner quickly cited "waiting for the rent" as the principal benefit of his engagement in the industry.

Despite the prominence of economic gain as an impetus for entering and continuing sex work, the multiplicity of ways to earn money in life encouraged us to question what other motivations exist. When further queried, workers reveal 5 additional factors influence their participation in this career:

- **Convenience**

It's always the convenience.

I'm the type of person I don't mind sex. I quite enjoy it. So, I thought you know why not?

I found the positive thing to be was the fact that I live in Tamworth, so ...

Flexibility.

- **Sexual Activity and Experimentation**

not the money. I think that the best part is being sex the active, and experimenting... trying new experiences like with women and using toys and... hearing the stories in experiences of other people concerning their sex life

I ... had discussed with my husband ideas about...sex workers...at different times in our relationship, over a period of ... eighteen years...so when it came to the decision to actually work...we had been...in a monogamous relationship where we'd both been virgins for...the entire time we'd been together...during the course of doing the experimenting with other couples, we had an ad on Internet...and a Scout from...Sydney had contacted me, asking if I wanted to work. It was during the Sydney Olympics and I think they were very short of workers – particular bisexual workers.

Just learning lots of new things.

- **Challenge and Achievement**

And I am doing it for the money, but a lot of that is to do with the challenge of it all. To make it work and be successful at it.

I mean it was something I was always interested in. I always thought it was a good job and ...that would be something I would do if I was brave enough.

I love hearing stories about women who have entered into the industry and have achieved what they wanted...goals fulfilled, or that they've got a hell of a lot more confidence in themselves, or that it's really expanded their perspective of the world or themselves. And I hear that on a really regular basis, that people who have never thought of working in the industry have entered into it

I was proud of what I did, and I was good at it. And I got a lot of money for it, which made me feel even better, because I'd just turn around and say, "Yeah, how much do you get paid an hour?"

I enjoy being able to be a counsellor in an unofficial capacity. I consider that in this work, I'm like a sex therapist...I'm using my skills from my church experience in social work experience and my skills as a psychotherapist and massage skills.

I like the, the skills I'm able to develop in doing it.

- **Escape**

...just the fact that I could get away from Orange

And dressing up.

- **Social Interaction**

I enjoyed meeting men – different kinds of men.

there are so many aspects I love. I feel really honoured when people let me into their confidence... I mean, someone who's never met me will let me into their house or into their workplace and share a cup of coffee...it will be 3 or 4 hours down the track, and we've...I feel really accepted...I'm very accepting of the industry too, so I feel really comfortable in my role.

When I first started, I thought it was very interesting. I loved the girls, loved meeting other ... well, men I suppose – not that I was ever interested in them – but I enjoyed their company ... talking to them and I loved the girls

The interaction probably wouldn't be too bad. If they're a nice person...I won't mind having a chat to 'em.

You get to know people very well. It's actually a skill of being able to read people, and figure out what they want without them having to tell you.

Being able to communicate and talk to those people...the nervous ones and make them feel relaxed...enough to talk to you and tell you, like that young chap saying what was the reason for his being there, because his wife sent him and I just found that quite interesting and those sorts of stories I just adore

meeting different people, I think is the most important thing because I'm a real peoples-person – I love people. And meeting the different types of...people – not all are good, but most are...just the support that you have in the job is great, with all the girls...(So what's the best part of your job?) The best part - socialising.

While traditional sociological studies of prostitution put forth androcentric theories of sexuality, viewing women as providers of services for men (McIntosh 1978), sociological feminist research foregrounding prostitution “from the point of view of the prostitute” (Anderson 1997: 258) raises new perceptions. According to Sullivan (1997), feminism argued strongly for prostitution to be regarded as work in the Seventies and Eighties, yet in the Nineties this argument divided feminists. Worker experiences in this study offer an alternative to feminist depictions of sex work as only a reinforcement of patriarchy and exploitation of women. It disputes some

feminist generalizations, such as Queensland Labour Party member Jan Power who used Pateman's proposal that "prostitution should not be seen as work because it [is] a matter of male power and the sexual exploitation of women" (Sullivan 1997: 218) to lobby for anti-prostitution laws.

Perceptions about sex work range from "sex worker organizations maintain[ing] that prostituted women are not victims but negotiators involved in business transactions" to feminists questioning women's power/status to control occupational health and safety (OH&S) issues in sex work, arguing "women in the sex industry remain disempowered" (Sullivan 2004: 261-62). While this study does not explore client-worker power relationships or OH&S issues, it demonstrates how some workers assert their occupation as empowering, non-victimizing and with identifiable rewards, economic and otherwise. It not only depicts prostitution as a distinctive work form, it provides data contradictory to the stereotypical bipolar images presented by Australian parliamentarians of sex workers as either "drug addicts and/or as single mothers fraudulently supporting their welfare income" (Sullivan 1997: 219) or "victims of circumstances who require some degree of state protection" (Sullivan 1997: 220). Our findings sit in contrast to the conservative sex politics espoused by radical feminists, such as Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon, Margaret Baldwin, and Christine Stark who herald resistance to the leftist agenda and the Sexual New World Order (Stark and Whisnat 2004).

In conclusion, we assert a more useful approach to understanding power dynamics embedded in sex work is to reject rhetoric making global generalizations in favour of enabling women to speak about their work experiences in the sex industry as unlabeled, de-stigmatized individuals, each with a unique voice and valid perception. This approach does not predetermine women's perceptions as alienated expressions of false consciousness but rather acknowledges the preconditions citizens in capitalistic democratic societies experience while simultaneously granting sex workers humanistic free will and the freedom of self-direction.

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